

Rosh Hashanah 5785

ראש השנה תשפ"ה

Crying With God

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, JTS



In an essay some years ago, the Israeli teacher and poet Sara Friedland ben Arza asked us to focus on the prayer *Hayom Harat Olam* (“Today the World Stands as at Birth”) in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. She asks why, in a religious tradition that moved away so notably from ancient mythological motifs, is there a rare reference to the “birthing” of the world? And why is that short prayer placed just after the shofar is blown? In fact, she makes another very perceptive observation. The imagery of the conception and birthing of children, so unusual in a liturgy that is mostly about God’s sovereignty and judgment, is actually at the very heart of every one of the scriptural readings for this holiday: Sarah and Isaac, Abraham and Ishmael, Hannah and Samuel, and Rachel and her exiled children. What, in the end, is this focus on the wish for, and fears for, children all about? Ben Arza’s answer is that by analogizing our relationship to God to the relationship of parents and children and using these vivid narratives to evoke spiritual and ethical depth on these days, the tradition is trying to direct our thoughts to God through things that we already know in the human realm.

The decision to birth children is an anticipation of joy accompanied by risk—we hope that our children will walk a road of goodness and righteousness and that we will be able to provide for them and protect them from the dangers of the world. What joy there is when all these hopes are fulfilled, and what inconsolable grief there is when they are not, when children go astray, or when we are unable to keep them safe. And so it is with God, whose decision to birth a world was from the beginning an act of love and delight in creation, but also—this poem teaches us—fraught with the very same perils that we face in our lives and families.

When those terrible fears for children (ours and God’s) become real, we weep. The Talmud tells us that God repairs

to a secret place in order to cry for the corruption of the world by God’s children. And parents whose children hurt others or are hurt by others, who are unable to keep their children from harm, or even death, cry a shattering cry. Those sobbing sounds are the broken and breath-snatching sounds of the shofar’s *shevarim* and *teruah*.

This year, we heard these wailings from the loved ones of the victims of October 7, from the families of Israeli hostages and of fallen IDF soldiers, and from the tormented parents in Gaza, children who are described in our Tanakh with the words, “Little children beg for bread, but none can give them a morsel” ([Lam. 4:4](#)). Can one imagine the anguish the heavenly Parent must feel seeing the tiny caskets being interred on both sides of a border that divides territory but not human nature?

That is perhaps why, immediately after those sobbing and wailing sounds of the shofar, *Hayom Harat Olam* deliberately gives us the bold image of God’s womb that conceived us. Perhaps by turning our thoughts to the pain felt by the Creator, we might be able to arouse compassion in our human family so as to end the nightmares we fear for those whom we have conceived in love.



Teshuvah: Seeking the Hidden Face of God

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz (RS), Vice President of the Schechter Institutes

This coming Shabbat, the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is known as *Shabbat Shuvah*, the “Sabbath of Return.” During the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we devote ourselves to the process of repentance, attempting to tip the balance in our favor as we approach the Day of Atonement. The Shabbat in between is considered an auspicious time to reflect on this sacred endeavor. It would seem that the Torah reading this week reinforces this notion, reminding us of earlier, harmonious days in our relationship with God ([Deut. 32:7](#)), and of days marred by our collective wayward behavior ([Deut. 32:15–16](#)). We indeed seek a closer, more intimate relationship with God and our fellow humans, and so hope that “our days will be renewed as of old” ([Lam. 5:21](#)).

About halfway through Moses’s poem of Parashat Ha’azinu, he describes God’s response to Israelite disloyalty. God is portrayed as “hiding the Divine face”: “The Lord saw and was vexed and spurned His sons and daughters. God said, ‘I will hide My countenance from them, and see how they fare in the end. For they are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them’” ([Deut. 32:19–20](#)). How are we to understand this expression?

Ramban (Moses Nahmanides) writes, “God said, ‘I will hide My countenance from them, and see how they fare in the end . . .’ that is, God said in His heart, or to the angels. And this expression of hiding God’s countenance means that when they will seek Me, they will not find Me.” For Ramban, there are two very important and seemingly contradictory points. First, when God makes this threat, Ramban explains that God says it either to Himself or to the ministering angels—not to the people. That is to say, God knows well that the Divine anger and threat should not preclude the process of *teshuvah* (repentance) and repair of relationship. Verbalizing such a destructive message directly to the people would lead to a sense of futility. Second, Nahmanides goes on to explain that the meaning of this

notion of “hiding” is that the people will go out to seek God, but ultimately fail in their search. In this instance, God’s quality of justice and desire for vengeance seems to overwhelm God’s desire for mercy.

Every year, we are given the gift of finding God anew. And while our previous track record may discourage God from opening the door, it should not deflate us and our attempts to open the door to repentance. Even when it seems we have drifted quite a distance from our Divine source, the possibility of returning is within reach. God may continue to hide the Divine Presence, but we need to be firm in “knocking harder.” Our persistence will awaken God’s quality of mercy. May our *teshuvah*, *tzedakah* (charity), and *tefillah* (prayer) both diminish the severity of the decree and lead to a revealing of the Divine countenance.